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ABSTRACT

As college student populations become more diverse and classes become more heterogeneous, instructors have an opportunity to implement leadership models based on the goals of empowerment, cooperation, inclusion, and collaboration. A heterarchical notion of leadership (in which information and authority flow across channels and input from all members of a collective is considered valid and important) can be useful for increasing classroom participation and helping students learn to work in groups. One of the ways to begin building connections across similarities and differences is to provide mechanisms for people to talk to one another. Such opportunities set the stage for students to work together in collaborative and mutually affirming ways. Instructors can serve as key players in this learning process by setting norms that support an open discussion of individual differences. For example, students may be asked to write about the differences they observe in their classmates regarding a specific issue under discussion. By emphasizing the need for open and honest communication, modeling effective listening skills, and providing positive reinforcement as students attempt new behaviors, instructors can help class members shift from superficial interaction with each other to a greater willingness to communicate and examine differences. Interventions aimed at cooperative learning as well as speaking create an atmosphere of shared experience. An important challenge in the process of learning to manage and appreciate differences is to develop some guidelines for generalizing what has been learned to future situations, which increases students' potential for meeting the challenge of diversity in the future. (JMC)

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Effective Group Work in Community Colleges

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Effective Group Work in Community Colleges

Introduction

The issue of diversity in our current times is a force to be reckoned with across a broad range of issues in today's world. As the world changes, in part due to technological advancements, opportunities for diverse groups of people to come in contact with one another increases. The need to learn how to effectively work with individual differences becomes paramount in business, industry and educational settings. In fact, the challenges and opportunities facing educational institutions are vast as educators strive to create ethical communities characterized by inclusion, participation, cooperation and collaboration and which respect the diversity of people and learning styles that present themselves in the classroom and the faculty senate. This diversity will especially express itself in institutions of higher education where, currently, older students represent 47 per cent of the credit enrollment in these institutions. Added to the increasing heterogeneity of students is the focus on programs in two-year institutions becoming truly interdisciplinary. Faculty may find themselves involved in a team approach to problem solving (Smith, 1985). In my remarks that follow I will discuss the concepts of cooperation and collaboration and their relationship to building communities in institutions of higher education, highlight an innovative paradigm which offers me an alternative view of leadership, and close with some observations and suggestions on how to utilize group process to facilitate the exploration of individual differences as all of us strive for ways to effectively manage and appreciate the diversity in our lives. I will be speaking from my experience in

university settings in the United States and invite you to listen and sort through what fits or does not fit your particular setting.

Cooperation, Collaboration and Empowerment

To begin, Alexander Astin (1987), a giant in the field of higher education, has noted that while competition has been central in American education, a shift to cooperation is essential. He notes that cooperation facilitates the development of teamwork skills and encourages the individual student to view each classmate as a potential helper rather than a competitor. This concept of cooperation has been hard to implement because as Whipple (1987) observes, cooperation and collaboration challenge the ethic of individual competition. He writes, "American culture in particular celebrates interpersonal competitiveness as a means to (almost a definition of) success" (p. 5). However, the impact of developmental guidance curriculum within public schools in the United States has resulted in increasing numbers of classroom groups designed to use members as resources. These classroom groups help students master abstract concepts, learn to manage disagreement and intellectual conflict, produce more active, engaged task oriented behavior, and provide a way of addressing the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous student population without the drawbacks of ability grouping and tracking (Cohen & Benton, 1989; Hulse-Killacky, 1986).

In addition, the concept of empowerment is gaining momentum. In her article, "New Paradigm/Leadership: Integrating The Female Ethos", Judy Rogers (1988) writes, "to empower followers means that the leader must share his or her power - converting followers into leaders and being shaped by, as well as shaping, one's followers" (p. 6). This quotation reflects a shift in thinking and behaving that

has recently begun, ever so slowly, to permeate business, industrial, and educational arenas where the concept of empowerment has surfaced in response to the recognition that the traditional top down structure is an impediment to learning. Rogers (1988) compares a hierarchy with a heterarchy. A hierarchy has an authoritative figure standing atop a pyramid of power, "all communication, control, responsibilities, and resources flow from the top downward. In a heterarchy, information and authority flow across channels, and input from all members of a collective is considered valid and important" (p. 4).

This notion is consistent with the views of James Banning (1988) who points to the need for different paradigms to help reduce competition and make real participation in a community possible. He suggests that despite some new diversity on college campuses, decision-making remains in the hands of a few. A true sense of community cannot be built, when racism and sexism exist, and when the concepts of winning and losing are central to the life of the community.

If, as a society, we are interested in seriously considering and implementing concepts of empowerment, cooperation, inclusion, and collaboration, then learning to work effectively in groups is a critical ingredient for accomplishing these goals in our educational settings. A perusal of the group literature (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1983) emphasizes that people need to feel included, to understand what the purpose of a given group is and to have some clarity about the role they are to play. In addition, as I have written elsewhere (Hulse, 1985), groups may not always be beneficial to members of oppressed populations (i.e., women, homosexuals, or minorities) when subtle, unconscious pressures are imposed from racist and sexist prejudices, cultural and homophobic stereotyping, and socioeconomic conditions.

In these cases the full participation of some group members will be inhibited and the potential for learning and change severely diminished (Reed, 1981).

Group Process in Education

I would like now to examine the role of group process utilizing a more heterarchical notion of leadership for increasing participation in classrooms and meeting rooms where diversity issues often collide. All too often in such places, people are engaged in the tasks of "what do we have to do and how are we going to do it?" As a result, questions of, "who am I and who am I with you" get pushed aside for later or ignored completely. It is still difficult for many faculty and administrators to reconcile the use of group process with the demands of providing course content to students or completing the items on an agenda. Because of this rush to get things done, many opportunities are lost to build relationships and truly get to know another person.

One of the ways to begin building connections across similarities and differences is to provide mechanisms for people to talk to one another or, as Sandy Kaplan (a research associate at the Stone Center, Wellesley College) states, "to tell their stories." Even in meeting/boardroom/faculty senate and classroom settings where the focus is often on content, the emphasis on connections can enhance attention to task or content. In my view these are complimentary, not polarized, constructs. Both Kaplan and Banning believe that collaborative realms are built by opportunities to get together and talk. Such opportunities set the stage for individuals to work in truly collaborative and mutually affirming ways. These notions are particularly critical for removing a sense of what Kaplan refers to as, "condemned isolation" which is felt by many women and minorities and for

generating the kind of real participation that Banning (1988) advocates. Through talking and sharing people learn how to listen to diverse perspectives, to validate other viewpoints and beliefs, and to strengthen skills for working together effectively.

A Framework for Addressing Individual Differences

If we believe that it is important to create a process for hearing people's stories and validating people's experiences, what are some of the strategies that can be implemented to actually bring these ideas to life? The following suggestions are taken from a manuscript that one of my doctoral students, Tom Earley, and I are revising for publication (Hulse-Killacky & Earley, 1990). I will share some techniques which we have found useful in helping our students within the classroom setting to manage and appreciate individual differences.

In our experience, there are several obstacles to the exploration of individual differences, including lack of knowledge and lack of opportunity to learn from others with differing viewpoints. Very often, students know little about each other and, consequently operate on a set of inaccurate preconceptions about each other and the issues under discussion. In addition, the experience of examining one's own perceptions and beliefs is a difficult and sometimes painful task, both personally and professionally. Instructors can serve as key players in this learning process by setting norms supporting an open discussion of individual differences, by pointing out that everyone is different, that each person brings a unique perspective to the class, and that mutual learning is a goal. Next, by emphasizing the need for open and honest communication, modeling effective listening skills, and providing positive reinforcement as students attempt new behaviors, the

instructor can help class members shift from superficial interaction between each other to a greater willingness to communicate and examine differences. To illustrate, we have asked students to write about the differences they observe in their classmates regarding a specific issue under discussion. Often this takes the form of asking them to write as if they were speaking directly to one another by using the phrase, "these are how my views are different from yours" (Frew, 1986). (Note: These papers are not shared with other students). This exercise serves the following functions by:

1. Opening the topic of difference for examination

2. Encouraging students to reflect on perceived differences with others and to focus attention on the sources of their own reactions to those differences

3. Encouraging discussion on the notion that difference does not mean "better" or "worse" than. The concept of difference, without a value referent, is thereby introduced

4. Providing an opportunity for students to look at how their perception and experience of difference is changing through repeated use of this experience.

We have also noticed that personal risk is an essential ingredient in efforts to expand one's own perceptions and beliefs. Conflicting world views often raise uncomfortable feelings and concerns about personal cost. Questions like, "what's in it for me?" and "why should I make myself miserable?" surface as barriers to changing perceptions and beliefs. This can be a critical point in students' emerging ability to become aware of and appreciate individual differences.

Once students begin to express their differences, the instructor needs to return to and pay special attention to safety issues. Experience suggests that an

important factor in the development of a sense of safety is getting to know one another well. The instructor can assist students by utilizing microlabs (Anderson, 1981) and other interpersonal activities that continue to build interaction and increase student knowledge about each other's views on a range of topics and beliefs. Another option is to ask students to pair-up with those they see as different and to take fifteen minutes to talk about those differences. The paraphrasing format is instituted as the structure for those discussions. This means that before person A responds to person B, Person A has to reflect accurately what has been stated by person B (and visa versa). This kind of interaction can facilitate an openness and commitment to change by:

1. Slowing down the rebuttal process
2. Encouraging the comprehension of another's thoughts and feelings
3. Providing a check against preconceptions
4. Taking the emotional charge out of contact with difference and beginning to break down polarization.

Interventions aimed at cooperative listening as well as speaking create an atmosphere of shared experience. This commonality can form a safe background for a mutual exploration of differences. As students begin to believe they are being heard they begin to hear. Through the process of hearing in a safe and open environment and exchanging thoughts and feelings, students are able to lower barriers between themselves and others. The result is an increasing ability and willingness to acknowledge and legitimize perceptions and beliefs.

A very real challenge in the process of learning to manage and appreciate differences, is to develop some guidelines for generalizing what has been learned to

to future situations. The following questions have been used to help students reflect on this experience (internally) and then to share those reflections with others in the class.

1. What was it like for you to get to know someone you perceive as different?

2. How did you allow yourself to go one step further with this individual; to really listen to him or her?

3. Can you identify the steps you used as you tried to listen more effectively to different viewpoints?

4. What have you learned about yourself in this process of confronting differences?

5. What skills or thoughts may assist you in the future as you encounter differences with other students and colleagues?

This process of illuminating and abstracting the experience is an important key to the ability to repeat and generalize beyond the specifics of a given situation. It also highlights what was learned and how it was learned. To the degree that students are able to reflect on their experience, they increase their potential for meeting the challenge of diversity in the future.

In reflection, Tom and I have observed several changes occurring following these types of interventions. First, students have demonstrated a greater respect for the essential core of another person. As students get to know each other, for example, their willingness to express differences increases. They have reported that mutual sharing sets the stage for the creation of trust and greater exploration of individual differences. Also mentioned is an increased awareness among students

of their limited understanding of another group of individuals or ideas; unlike previous reactions to differences (i.e., where difference had a value referent), there is now an awareness and willingness to state that they possess incomplete knowledge and need to look further for greater understanding.

Final Comments

A major point I would like to end with is that we as educators and administrators in institutions of higher education must engage creatively and with persistence in developing climates which value and validate the range of personal experiences and perspectives that characterize the diversity surrounding us. Questions of, "who am I and who am I with you?" must find a prominent location alongside of the questions, "what do we have to do and how are we going to do it?" The hierarchical nature of most of our institutions makes it hard to start examining and engaging with process issues. Often success is equated with competitive success and the notion of competitive success may inhibit connections and diminish efforts to build participatory communities. However, on a bright and optimistic note, there are emerging models in our world (such as Rogers' paradigm) that provide direction and road maps to assist us in this journey. In fact, recently when I attended my last board meeting of a national group association, I encouraged the members to consider having someone come in as a process observer in order to assist this particular body, which promotes goup work nationally, to indeed practice what they preach. Even with experienced group workers, task and process can become dichotomized, resulting in a narrow focus on task issues at executive board meetings.

Finally, I wish to underscore that empowerment, cooperation, inclusion, and collaboration cannot come to institutions of higher education without a mutual, more heterarchical involvement among all parties. Faculty do not just need group dynamics and leadership skills incorporated through workshops and presentations. They desperately need support and permission to broaden their classroom behavior to include a focus on these process issues discussed here today. In addition, if we are to manage the diversity issues in our classrooms and meeting rooms then we need to develop compassion. Greenspan (1983) defines compassion as an embracing emotion, one that grows out of an understanding of people's pain and enables truly human connections to occur. I believe that those in administrative positions in community colleges and universities hold a key to whether true connections and a sense of community can develop in which diversity can survive and thrive. If administrators can learn how to utilize group work in their job and to administer from a more heterarchical than hierarchical perspective, then they will model themselves as leaders who covert their followers into leaders and who are also shaped by their followers. I close with a quote from noted educator Warren Bennis (1985) which provides a wonderful picture of what I am proposing:

> effective leadership can move followers to higher degrees of consciousness, such as liberty, freedom, justice, and self-actualization. The end result of the leadership we have advanced is empowerment, an organizational culture that helps employees generate a sense of meaning in their work and a desire to challenge themselves to experience success (p. 218).

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